First Annual

National Symposium on African American Theatre

~THEME~

F. D. Bluford Library

October 14-15, 1994

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
Greensboro

Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts

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First Annual
National Symposium on African American Theatre
THEME:
AUGUST WILSON

OVERVIEW
By Samuel A. Hay

INTRODUCTION

The first annual National Symposium on African American Theatre will study the five plays written by August Wilson (1945 —). Each play, set in a different decade, is part of a cycle about the African American experience in twentieth-century America. The question that binds the plays is, What are those enduring beliefs, attitudes, and practices that hold the greatest promise of ensuring that people are never cut off from their replenishing history? The research question for the Symposium, therefore, is, In terms of plots, characters, themes, and sounds of what historical, dramaturgical, political, and/or socio-economic significance are the August Wilson plays?

THE PLAYS

The answers to these questions come from the circumstances peculiar to each play's place and decade. In Chicago in 1927, the setting for the first play, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984), the major issue confronting many African Americans — as seen by Wilson — was rootlessness. One might not have ever seen this as a major concern, given the marketed vitality of African American life during the twenties, which was captured in four hundred and nine black musical comedies on Broadway. Fifty musicals were produced in 1927 alone, one of which, Brown Sugar, was even written by the Pan Africanist Marcus Garvey. Wilson theorized that this very show-music itself evidenced a disconnect from ancestry: Having come from the South in droves during World War I, most people filled industrial plants that left them unplanted. This contributed to some people's treating each other like commodities and escape-valves. By examining this strange and unAfrican thing, Wilson suggests the ancient blues as the reconnect.

The second play, Fences (1985), is set in Pittsburgh, some thirty years later, 1957. Wilson does not celebrate, interestingly enough, such civil rights gains as the passing that year of the first Federal civil rights legislation since 1875, or President Dwight D. Eisenhower's ordering Federal troops to Little Rock, or Tuskegee's boycotting of city stores, or New York City's adopting the first Fair Housing Practice Law. Wilson, instead, studies four generations of an African American family: He probes their bonding — or lack of it, looking for what the director Lloyd Richards calls the values of "work, of family responsibility, of respect for home, of land ownership, and of education." Without these, Wilson shows, neither a budding civil rights nor thirty years makes the Maxsons in Fences any less isolated than Ma Rainey's blues band.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1986) takes place in Pittsburgh in 1911, the year of increased tricklings out of the South. The boxer Jack Johnson resigned as heavyweight champion, and the great comic — and philosopher — Bert Williams integrated the Ziegfeld Follies. The NAACP approved its constitution. In his Crisis magazine, the sociologist William E. B. Du Bois launched a popular section on Talented Tenth firsts: inventors, surgeons, psychiatrists, architects, and other models. In his play, Wilson sees through all of this individualism. He hones in on a wandering and hiding people "cut off from memory" — trying desperately to find meaning by searching for themselves and others, as well as for themselves in others and others in themselves.

The fourth play, The Piano Lesson (1987), is set, again, in Pittsburgh, but in 1936. This was a time when racial breakthroughs were breaking out all over: Orson Welles's voodoo Macbeth; the graduation of Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., from West Point; Dr. Rudolph Fisher's voodoo The Conjur Man Dies ; the election of the former president of the National Bar Association Charles Anderson to the Kentucky Legislature; the revival of Eugene O'Neill's voodoo The Emperor Jones; the election of Arthur W. Mitchell of Illinois to Congress; and Rex Ingram's starring in the film, Green Pastures. With such other-world and stellar climbs, it is no wonder that Boy Willie in The Piano Lesson wants to sell the family heirloom in order to hitch himself up to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's rising New Deal.

Most fascinating about the setting of the final play, Two Trains Running (1990), is its being in The Hill, the Wilson-ground in his Pittsburgh — in 1969, no less. It was clear by then that few government officials had planned to play by any rules that required sharing power and privilege. The Urban Coalition of Urban America, Inc. reported that the U. S. was moving closer toward two societies — one black, one white — separate and unequal. The U. S. Civil Rights Commission charged that the Government had subsidized racial discrimination in employment. The U. S. Civil Service Commission said that it had found some evidence of racial discrimination in the Government Printing Office. Thirty-one African American college presidents criticized the Federal government for not understanding the role of the 113 predominantly black colleges. The Southern Regional Council charged that the U. S. Department of Agriculture was the Government's worst offender in racial discrimination. The results of a decade-long struggle to end all this seemed quite mixed in 1969. Two Black Panthers were shot to death at UCLA. Eight Black Panthers were arrested in New Haven, CT., on murder and conspiracy charges. Stokely Carmichael resigned from the Black Panther party because of its alliance with white radicals. Five Chicago policemen were wounded in a gun battle with the Black Panther party members. State's Attorney's police staged a pre-dawn raid on a Black Panther party apartment and killed Fred Hampton. Los Angeles police fought a four-hour battle with the Panthers. The American Civil Liberties Union reported that law enforcement agencies across the country continually violated Black Panther civil liberties. Seeing all this, the never-seen seer in Two Trains sends word to The Hill through a recently released prison inmate that African Americans should play no games in which they have had no say in making up the rules.

THE HONORS

Wilson's spellbinding plays are acclaimed by audiences and critics alike. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Fences in 1987 and for The Piano Lesson in 1990. He received the Tony Award for Fences. He got the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom in 1984, for Fences in 1987, for Joe Turner's Come and Gone in 1988, and for The Piano Lesson in 1990. He was recipient of the Drama Desk Award for Fences and The Piano Lesson.

SYMPOSIUM GOALS

Wilson's awards are but slight indicators of the value of this man, as well as of the need to study seriously this writer who consistently says new things in such fresh ways. The goals of this Symposium, therefore, are

1. To analyze the critical significance of Wilson in American drama and theatre;
2. To evaluate the historical importance of Wilson in African American theatre;
3. To develop an understanding of the links between the Wilson dramatic structure and the Jazz Blues musical structures;
4. To cultivate the tastes needed to appreciate music-dialogue;
5. To develop an understanding of Wilson's balanced and detached interpretations of such themes as the development of individual and community empowerment; and
6. To discover the Wilson processes of developing believable characters that are bred from African American life and history.

PROGRAM

October 14, 1994

F. D. Bluford Library — Room 258

FIRST SESSION — Dr. Samuel A. Hay Presiding

9 - 9:50	Registration/Coffee and Donuts	Library Staff Lounge
9:50 - 10	Welcome	Dr. Ronald O. Smith Asst Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
10-10:50	*"Ed Bullins on August Wilson"*	Ed Bullins San Francisco State University
11 - 11:50	*"August Wilson: A Biographical Essay"*	Dr. Corlis A. Hayes Livingstone College

DEAN'S LUNCH

12 - 1:50	Dr. A. James Hicks, Presiding	Dowdy - 304 Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

SECOND SESSION — Ms. Frankie Day Presiding

2 - 2:50	*"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"*	Dr. Harry Elam Stanford University
3 - 3:50	*"Fences"*	Dr. Thomas D. Pawley Lincoln University (MO)
5 - 7:30	DINNER	

PERFORMANCE

8 - 10:30	*"The Piano Lesson"* The Award-Winning Richard B. Harrison Players Directed by Ms. Frankie Day Town Hall Auditorium — Greensboro Coliseum
10:30 - 11	*Reception* Hospitality Suite B — Greensboro Coliseum

PROGRAM

October 15, 1994

F. D. Bluford Library — Room 258

THIRD SESSION — Ms. Sheryl Joshua Presiding

9 - 9:50	Registration Coffee and Donuts	Library Staff Lounge
9:50 - 10	Announcements	
10-10:50	*"Joe Turner's Come and Gone"*	Dr. Errol Hill Dartmouth College
11 - 11:50	*"The Piano Lesson"*	Dr. Winona L. Fletcher Indiana University

CHAIR'S LUNCHEON

12 - 1:50	Dr. Samuel A. Hay, Presiding Interim Chair, Department of Speech, Communication and Theatre Arts	Dowdy - 304

FOURTH SESSION — Mr. Miller Lucky, Jr. Presiding

2 - 2:50	*"Two Trains Running"*	Prof. Beth Turner New York University
3 - 3:50	*"Dutton on Wilson"* *	Charles S. Dutton Hollywood, CA
	"Historical Importance of Wilson"	Dr. Samuel A. Hay NC A&T State University
5 - 7:30	DINNER	

PERFORMANCE

8 - 10:30 *"The Piano Lesson"*
The Award-Winning Richard B. Harrison Players
Directed by Ms. Frankie Day
Town Hall Auditorium — Greensboro Coliseum

10:30 *Jazz*

*** Schedule permitting**

~ ~ *LECTURERS* ~ ~

~ED BULLINS~

Ed Bullins almost dominated New York City theatre between 1968 and 1982 by writing fourteen of his thirty-two full-length plays, twenty-five of his fifty-four shorts, and five of his fourteen musicals. He has published four volumes of plays (Five Plays by Ed Bullins (1968), The Fabulous Miss Marie (1970), The Duplex: A Black Love Fable in Four Movements (1971), Four Dynamite Plays (1972), and The Theme Is Blackness (1972), as well as short prose, The Hungered One: Early Writings (1971) and a novel The Reluctant Rapist (1973). He has edited New Plays from the Black Theatre (1969), The New Lafayette Theatre Presents: The Complete Plays and Aesthetic Comments by Six Black Playwrights (1973), Black Theatre Magazine (1968-1969), and the BMT Newsletter (1988-1989). Bullins is founder of the New Lafayette Theatre's Black Theatre Workshop (1970-1972), The New York Shakespeare Festival's Playwriting Workshop (1975-1982), and The BMT Theatre (1988 -). He has received the New York Drama Critics Award, the Drama Desk-Vernon Rice Award, The Drama Prize at the Venice Biennale Arts Festival, Best American Short Play (1990), the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters from Columbia College in Chicago, along with three Obie Awards, two Guggenheim Fellowships, four Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting grants, and two National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting grants.

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~HARRY ELAM~

Harry J. Elam, Jr., is associate professor of Theatre and director of the Committee on Black Performing Arts at Stanford University. He authored The Ritual of Social Protest Theatre (University of Michigan, under consideration) and Reconfiguring History: The Past as Present in Contemporary African American Drama (University of Michigan, proposal under consideration). He has written four book chapters, including "Of Angels and Transcendence: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Fences by August Wilson and Roosters by Milcha Sanchez-Scott," in Staging Difference: Pluralism in American Theatre, ed. Marc Maufort (Peter Lang, forthcoming) and "August Wilson's Women," in May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Plays of August Wilson, ed. Alan Nadel (University of Iowa, 1994). Among his five published refereed articles are "The Visual Representation of The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs by Simone Benmussa," Text and Performance Quarterly (Fall 1991), and "Revolution and Ritual: Luis Valdez's Quinta Temporada and LeRoi Jones's Slave Ship," Theatre Journal (1986). A noted director, Dr. Elam has received many grants and awards, and he has delivered scholarly papers throughout the United States.

Lecturers (Continued)

~WINONA LEE FLETCHER~

Winona L. Fletcher is retired professor of Theatre and Drama and of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University. She is the author of Perspectives on Black Theatre, NADSA Monograph Series, Numbers 1 (1989) and 2 (1990). An expert on the playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, Dr. Lee has written articles on Johnson for the Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940 (Gale, 1986) and Women in Theatre: The Theatre Annual (University of Akron, 1985). She is author of "Drama in the 1970's" in Essays on Contemporary American Drama, ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Adler, 1981) and "Who Put the 'Tragic' in the Tragic Mullato?" in Women in American Theatre, ed. Helen Chinoy and Linda Jenkins (Crown, 1981). She has received several grants to produce and direct performances. In 1979, she was elected to the College of Fellows in the American Theatre Association.

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~SAMUEL A. HAY~

Samuel Hay is professor of Theatre and interim chair of the Department of Speech Communication, Mass Communication, and Theatre Arts at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. He is the author of African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis (Cambridge University, 1994) and the recently completed Ed Bullins: A Literary Biography (Cambridge University, under consideration). He co-edited the six volumes of Focus on Literature (Houghton-Mifflin, 1978). His more than fifty scholarly articles, reviews, and papers have appeared in refereed journals throughout the United States. His latest bock review is of New/Lost Plays by Ed Bullins: An Anthology, ed. Ethel Pitts Walker (Aiea, HI: That New Publishing Co., P. O. Box 621, 1994), Theatre Journal (forthcoming). He is founder of the National Conference on African American Theatre, Inc., which sponsors an annual meeting each April on theatre history and criticism in Baltimore, Maryland. He has received almost two million dollars in grants. Among his honors are two Fulbright fellowships.

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Lecturers (Continued)

~CORLIS A. HAYES~

Corlis A. Hayes is the director of Theatre and an assistant professor in the Department of English and Modern Foreign Languages at Livingstone College. She is a director and actress. Among the shows she has directed are A Soldier's Play, For Colored Girls, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, The Militant Preacher, and No Place to Be Somebody. She has appeared as Dussie Mae in August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom at Quest Theatre and Institute in West Palm Beach, Florida, and as Rose in Wilson's Fences at Southern Illinois University, where she wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on August Wilson. Among her many honors and fellowships are the Fred L. Dowell Award for Outstanding Scholars in Theatre and the Roby Honoree for Academics at Southern Illinois.

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~ERROL HILL~

Errol Hill is retired John D. Willard Professor of Drama and Oratory and the Director of Theatre for Summer Repertory Program at Dartmouth College. He is a respected actor, director, playwright, and scholar. He is the author of The Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900 (University of Massachusetts, 1992), Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors (University of Massachusetts, 1984), and The Trinidad Carnival (University of Texas, 1972). Among his many edited volumes, including several collections of Caribbean plays, are Black Heroes: Seven Plays (Applause, 1989) and The Theatre of Black Americans (Applause, 1987). He has authored hundreds of scholarly papers, forewords, and introductions, the latest of which is the Introduction to the reprint of Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian (Howard, 1993). Among his many national and international fellowships, grants, and awards is the Barnard Hewitt Award for Research in Theatre History.

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Lecturers (Continued)

~THOMAS D. PAWLEY~

Thomas D. Pawley, III, is the retired dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Curators' Distinguished Professor of Speech and Theatre at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri. He is author with William Reardon of The Black Teacher and the Dramatic Arts (Negro Universities, 1970). Among his eleven plays is The Tumult and the Shouting, in Black Theatre U.S.A. ed. James B. Hatch and Ted Shrine, (Free, 1974). His more than seventeen scholarly articles include "The Black World of Eugene O'Neill" in Eugene O'Neill in China, ed. Lui Haiping and Lowell Swortzell (Greenwood, 1992). Dr. Pawley has published more than fifty poems, reviews, and forewords, the most recent of which was the foreword to the second edition of Black Drama in America: An Anthology, ed. Darwin T. Turner (Howard, 1994). Among Dr. Pawley's many grants, fellowships, and awards was the election to the College of Fellow of the American Theatre Association (1978).

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~BETH TURNER~

Beth Turner is assistant professor of drama at the Tisch School of the Arts of New York University. She is the founder, publisher, and editor of the highly respected Black Masks, a decade-old bi-monthly magazine on the Black performing arts. Among her publications are the Foreword to Pearl by Shauneille Perry (Rejoti, 1993); "Theatre" in Black Arts Annual, ed. Donald Bogle (Garland, 1989 and 1990); "Crisis at Little Rock," in Search (1977); and "The Hungering Lion," in Search (1976). Her six produced plays are Sing on Ms. Griot, La Morena, Gursky and the Fabulous Four, Fisions: A Dream for the Bronx, Ode to Mariah, and Come, Liberty. The last play was performed at the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. Ms. Turner is a member of the board of directors of Woodie King's New Federal Theatre, a member of the advisory committee of AUDELCO, and a member of the National Advisory Board for the National Black Theatre Festival. Among her many grants and awards are ones from the New York State Council on the Arts and the John Hay Whitney Foundation.

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